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Keywords
Reflexivity, New Media, and Italian Immigrants

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This article discusses the centrality of reflexivity in qualitative research through examples from my study on the role new media play in the lives of Italians in London. My hypothesis was that Italians were "in transit" in London and they were using new media to build "temporary" communities. I conducted in-depth interviews with members of the Italianialondra.com online community. I found they settled in London and the online community, instead of supporting "nomadic" identities, was used for re-territorialization. Through reflexivity I was able to determine the reasons for a partially wrong hypothesis. I also identified biases that clouded my interpretations of the object of study; thus promoting rich insight and enabling public scrutiny of the integrity of the research. Key Words: Reflexivity, New Media, and Italian Immigrants

Introduction

Various frameworks for considering reflexivity have been elaborated by different researchers. For example, Hardy, Phillips, and Clegg (2001) argue that reflexivity involves reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes. Reflexivity also concerns researcher's assumptions about what they can know and how they claim to know it (i.e., ontology and epistemology). Epistemological reflexivity may entail reflecting on why being interested in some particular research questions, what disciplinary-based interpretive frameworks inform our accounts, and what aspects of our disciplinary background lead us to dwell on certain aspects of the research context and not others. Finaly (2002b) points out that a unifying theme is the project of examining how the researcher and inter-subjective elements impact and transform research. This paper discusses the importance of reflexivity with respect to one aspect of research-practice: methodology. The focus is on the importance for the researcher to continually question presuppositions and preconceptions in order to promote rich insight and enable public scrutiny of the integrity of the research (Finlay, 2002a).

In developing the discussion I draw from examples from my research, which aim was to provide an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural role of the online community hosted on the Italianialondra.com Website. This was created in 2003 to encourage communication among Italians living in London.

Being Italian, as the respondents, provided advantages in adopting an emic, internal perspective and in grasping what the informants experienced. When the respondents referred to Italian stereotypes, I already acknowledged the body of symbolic references through which Italians represent themselves and I was able to understand references to regional differences, stereotypical images and particular Italian attitudes to kinetics and proxemics. I also had the advantage of comprehending differences between ordinary daily life in Italy and London since, as I explain in the next section, I had experienced both. On the other hand, in interpreting actions of the

respondents, by assuming a detached perspective I attempted not to enter into the analysis with any preconceptions. However, I must admit that despite the fact that this was my intention, my background biased the development of the research hypothesis and sampling strategies. In this article, I explain how I managed to overcome this limitation resorting to reflexivity. As Patton (1990) argues, admitting biases and feelings – not trying to hide them as sometimes occurs in quantitative methods – adds validity. While in quantitative methodology, as Jensen (2002) says, interpretative agency tends to be exercised in sequential and delegated forms – segregating the phases of operationalization and analysis from interpretation and discussion, and delegating certain moments of a study to collaborators as well as machines (Jensen, p. 236) – in qualitative research, the researcher is irreplaceable. Jensen clarifies that the method requires the researcher to be responsive to environmental cues, to be able to interact with the situation, to have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously, to perceive situations holistically, and explore atypical or unexpected responses. This paper documents the unexpected outcomes that I obtained during my fieldwork, and it explains how reflexivity opened up new insights into the new trend of Italian migration. I conclude by discussing the results from the research in the light of Finaly's maps (2002b, Discussion Section). Finaly outlines various ways of approaching reflexivity, which enable researcher "to choose their preferred route through the swamp" (Finaly, 2002b, p. 209), and I believe this could be of help especially for novice qualitative researchers.

A study about the role of an online community in the lives of Italians living in London

As mentioned in the introduction, my research analysed the social and cultural role of Italianialondra.com, an online community created to facilitate communication among Italians living in London. My goal was to understand how Italian identities are formed and transformed in a foreign environment, and what role the Italianialondra.com community played in such a process.

I decided to study the influence of online communication on the social life of Italians in London because, as an Italian in London myself, I was experiencing how difficult it is to become integrated into a new environment and I was reflecting on the benefits that can be derived from CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). It seemed that Italianialondra.com could be a bridge between London and home/Italy since technological innovations and geopolitical changes today allow people, who are scattered around the world, to retain online ties with friends and families in their homeland or in other countries. An increasing number of studies (Georgiou, 2002; Hiller & Franz, 2004; Mandaville, 2003; Mitra, 2005; Tsaliki, 2003; Yao, 2009) have demonstrated that web pages and discussion groups emerge as tools for migrants to bring friends and families together and to develop networks for political discussions. Moreover I considered the literature that demonstrates that the dominant and normative Social Network Sites (SNSs) usage pattern is to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Boyd, 2008).

As Diminescu (2008) argues, due to the increase in communication and travel, while "yesterday the motto was: immigrate and cut your roots; today it would be: circulate and keep in touch" (p. 568). Diminescu points out that today's generations, who have become used to mobility, are endowed with an exceptional ability to continuously renew their bond with their home environment even as they establish contacts with the societies of the countries of destination. The aim was to investigate whether this was the case for the latest generation of Italians in London. I questioned

whether other Italian migrants, like me, had to face problems of being "in-between space" or "neither here nor there but here and there at the same time" (Diminescu, p. 569). The idea was that online social media could reinforce relationships across space, linking migrants and non-migrants, and, consequently, I investigated to what extent the Web was helping Italians in London.

As Chen and Wellman (2009) suggest "net and jet" is helping many to get beyond Robert K. Merton's (1957) conjecture a generation ago that people function either as boundary-crossing "cosmopolitans" or as encapsulated "locals". Now, many may be "glocal": locally-based but globally connected. Wellman analysed how Chinese-Canadian entrepreneurs combine the Internet and airplane travel in their business activities and he found that geographic and social distance has not died as a constraint on contact. Chen and Wellman demonstrate that while many ties are global, local ties within the host country predominate in immigrants networks and that, while being able to build connections across ethnic boundaries, entrepreneurs build networks dominated by co-ethnic ties. Chen and Wellman conclude that, however, the Internet is not sufficient for cultivating glocalized networks, and face-to-face interaction remains indispensable and overseas travel is crucial for adding a human touch to glocalized networks.

With regard to the aims of my study, Wellman's (1998) findings encourage the reflection on the possibility that Itaianialondra.com could be a substitute for community where Italian migrants could "temporarily" recreate a sense of home and belonging.

Today, very often Italian graduates travel abroad for short-term work or study experience, and then return Italy. The hypothesis was that these Italians were comparable to "knowledge nomads". According to Pittinsky and Shih (2004) "knowledge nomads" are highly mobile workers. Pittinsky and Shih argue:

> Like nomadic people, they move frequently from place to place. No one organization is their home for life. But also, like nomadic people, they build homes, attachments, and commitment to places when they stop. They are motivated to work hard and commit themselves strongly to the organizations in which they sojourn. These commitments do not, however, prevent these workers from moving again. (p. 793)

Pittinsky and Shih (2004) present empirical evidence of strong commitment among highly mobile workers. They claim that organizational commitment is not only a theoretical possibility among highly mobile workers, but at times is an observable fact. Although the perspective of this research is not organizational, I report Pittinsky, and Shih's findings since the metaphor of the nomad represents an image of the traveller to which the Italians in London were compared. Consequently, they were supposed to be mobile workers able continuously to adapt to change, far removed from the profile of the classical migrant, committed to multiple attachments but still mobile (not only from one occupation to another but also from one place to another).

Finally, London emerged as the ideal setting for reflecting on community strategies. For mobile workers it could be the launch site from which to create a new global interconnected business as well as the ideal place to take advantage of anonymity and some measure of freedom. However, its complex social fabric could also be the reason for new physical networks that compensate anonymity and loneliness. The existence of the Italianialondra.com online community encouraged reflection on these possibilities.

Research question and main aims

The initial hypothesis of the research was that the members of Italianialondra.com were building ”temporary” virtual communities that made them feel at home while in London. Therefore, the study investigated whom these Italians were contacting through Italianialondra.com and what kind of sociality it supported. I questioned whether Italian travellers were using the Web from London as a support when moving from one environment to the other, and how this could have affected the constitution of their identity. The overall purpose was to delineate a profile of the new Italian migrant, taking into consideration the respondents' experiences and backgrounds, demographics and rate of adoption of new technologies. The aim was is not to produce a set of comparative data, but to refine the "positionality" of the people concerned and open up new insights into new migration trends and the role of new media in supporting these.

Why use qualitative methodology: An interpretative practice

The meta-field of Internet Studies, to which this research aims to contribute, is still evolving; the debate about methodology issues in this area of work is ongoing and open to new developments. As it was officially discussed in a special issue of *The Information Society*, published in 2005, I cannot draw on a definite discipline. The discussion between scholars was on the question of whether Internet Studies might be considered a discipline and the answer was clear "no" (Baym, 2005). Accordingly, Silver writes that, while simultaneously drawing and building on other, older research streams (e.g., computers and composition, computer-supported co-operative work, hyper/cybertext theory, and human–computer interaction), Internet Studies continues to grow in what can only be called a meta-field of study (Silver, 2004). Baym argues that Internet Studies do not have clear organizational forms, central themes or shared terminology with (assumed) common definitions, and not even a canon of literature considered essential. Internet Studies do not have departments, research centres, office spaces, support staff and letterhead stationery. Jones (2005) also notes that methods specific to Internet Studies do not yet exist, and perhaps most importantly, there is not yet a theoretical structure for exploration of Internet.

Because Internet Studies have no distinct methodology (Baym, 2005; Silver, 2004), I have decided to adopt a qualitative approach for my work as I believe a qualitative method was required in order to understand the full, multidimensional dynamic picture of the Italianialondra.com online community (the context), and its social and cultural complexity, patterns and configurations among factors or people acting within it (processes in a state of becoming).

In this research the social constructivism ontology and epistemology standing was taken. Social constructivism is grounded in the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz who proposes that an adequate social theory depends upon the use of the common sense methods, which human beings use to make sense of their social world (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Social constructivism emphasizes that the facts of the world are not independent of us as observers and that scientific knowledge is always the result of a situated perspective (Paccagnella, 1997). This view implies that people create their own reality through an iterative process where man is at the same time producer and product of the social (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, the paradigm demands sensitivity towards the setting or context of the life-world of those being studied.

Taking into account the constructivist paradigm I chose a methodology that may produce interpretative understanding rather than causal explanations. I thought that an ethnographic approach would enable me to build up a rapport with the Italians in London in order to access their social worlds. It was considered that in-depth interviews could be suitable tools to see the world of Italians form inside, to enter the social world under investigation and emerge with the kind of richly detailed, descriptive data described by Geertz (1993) as "thick description." This approach offers a depth of analysis based on experience and understandings and allows a picture of life as it is lived, assuming that human life cannot be understood solely by speculations based on empirical observation or on the qualification of those observations.

Qualitative methodology was the tool for disentangling processes and understanding the meanings that people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds. Interest is not in a product, but in how, in a limited period of their lives, Italians abroad were making sense of their lives, their experiences and how they were structuring the world. Therefore, I interpreted structures of meanings, superimposed upon or knotted into one another, striving to understand how and why behaviour is shaped in one way as opposed to another. In order to accomplish this analysis, I considered the world as a construction of ideas, meanings and symbols that determine human behaviour.

As with the interpretative methodological strategies, this study aimed to illuminate meaning in the subjects' lives and in their practices, beliefs and actions. This aim was addressed within a theoretical framework that highlights that culture, and the identities, which express it, are dynamic processes in continual evolution, in which social actors play an active role interpreting, reinterpreting and altering the flows in which they are embedded. These assumptions validate the use of qualitative methodology. I aimed to analyse the whole process in its development without dividing the phenomenon into manageable, clearly defined pieces, or variables in the way that quantitative methods do. Quantification is good for separating phenomena into distinct and workable elements of a well-defined conceptual framework, but when focusing on complex processes, it may miss key factors for a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. In doing this, I focused on the articulations between different forms of social differentiation, considering them as contingent relationships with multiple determinations, and, according to Geertz (1993), as *systems of meaning*. The purpose was to give detailed attention to the phenomena within their everyday contexts (how the offline life is related to the online) and to analyse how, in the online space, the meaning making process is organized and institutionalized. In order to analyse the networks of relationships as fully as possible and tease out the prominent patterns in such networks, I gathered and deconstructed rich and detailed narratives and reports.

It has to be specified that during the research it emerged that the sample I selected cannot be considered representative of the whole website population, which varies in social status and occupation. Consequently, generalizations emerging from the findings can be applied only to members of the Italianialondra.com online community responding to the criteria (Section: Sampling Procedures) chosen to select the sample. An increasing number of studies demonstrate (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2004; Herring 2004c) that the demographics of users have shifted towards younger and less technically skilled populations. However, generalizations cannot be made about various types of users. For example, less enfranchised migrants are generally preoccupied with the practicalities of livelihood and residence in new settings. This

certainly does not preclude the idea that they do participate in online communication flows. However, I believe that access and time restriction imposed by job requirements can limit their abilities to participate in and consequently benefit from the Web, in comparison with the majority of highly educated professionals dwelling in Western countries. Generalization also cannot be extended to contexts other than those of the metropolis.

Sampling Procedures

When the researcher biases the research hypothesis and sampling strategies, an example

The primary criteria I chose in order to select the sample were that participants should:

(1) Have Italian as their native language
(2) Be first generation immigrants
(3) Live in London
(4) Be members of the Italianialondra.com online community
(5) Be employed at a managerial level and/or be highly educated (to degree level)
(6) Be aged between twenty-five and forty years old

This selection was chosen to focus attention on the fact that today very often Italian graduates are forced to travel abroad to make use of their higher educational background rather than remain unemployed in Italy (Pezzulli, 2004). The percentage of Italian graduates working abroad is 2.3% and the percentage of European graduates working in Italy is 0.3% (Eurostat, 1999, as cited in Peri, 2002). Morano-Foadi and Foadi (2003) argue that this phenomenon is a unique feature of Italy and it envisages a *brain drain* problem while, on the contrary, other large economies in the European Union experience a *brain exchange.* Morano-Foadi and Foadi argue that there is a lack of quantitative data on the actual number of graduates who have moved or are on the move from Italy to the UK. The latest statistics have been published in Italy in 1997 and therefore refer to the nineties.

I assumed that the members of the virtual community were like me: upper middle-class, highly educated people temporarily living in London in order to improve their education or for work experience, through which they would gain advancement once they returned to Italy. This hypothesis was partially wrong. Yet I did not have to modify the research design, but I resorted to reflexivity. As it is explained further on in this article, reflecting on the way in which research was carried out promoted rich insight and enabled scrutiny of the integrity of the research (Finlay, 2002a).

Since there are difficulties in comparing the Italian socio-demographic classification with the British one, I did not choose social class as a selection criterion. The reason for this is that different classifications of Italian social class distribution do not match the British classification. While in British society (Abercrombie & Warde, 1994, p. 127), contemporary social mobility definitely operates with seven occupational classes, contradictions emerge in the Italian classification. For example, the Italian National Institute for Statistics (ISTAT; 1991) defines ”routine workers” as part of the proletariat, whereas Sylos Labini (1988) defines them as part of the petit

bourgeois. Moreover, Sylos Labini takes into consideration the lumpenproletariat, which is not classified in the other source. Sylos Labini's classification is closer to the British one, while the ISTAT classification better represents contemporary job distribution. Therefore, in order not to confuse the respondents, I did not directly ask them to define themselves according to social class. However, during the analysis of data, social class issues emerged. So, I contacted the interviewees to ask them their parents' occupations. From this, I defined the participants' social background. Finally, I chose to select Italians between age between twenty-five and forty in order to limit the scope of the research.

Using a non-probabilistic sampling strategy (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 78), I selected a small sample to "represent" and "symbolize" aspects relevance to the investigation.

Before contacting the users, I asked the manager of the community for permission to post an announcement on the website's Forum explaining the details of the research. The manager agreed and replied that he would directly forward the announcement to the entire community. Then, I re-posted the request once a week in order to increase response rates, since a newsgroup posting usually moves down the list of postings fairly quickly, and eventually expires. I strived for simple and clear layouts and ensured that the announcement was correct in all details. I observed the guidelines issued by Ess and the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) Working Committee (2002) in writing the posting. Accordingly, in the forwarded posting, I introduced myself, said why I was interested in the virtual community, how I was planning to go about studying the volunteers. I anticipated how I was going to interact and in what ways the study will be used. I specified that in order to complete the Literature Review and the required training to start my research, I was living in London for one year. The aim was to establish confidentiality with the potential participants and emphasize the familiarity between them and my own experiences. Finally, I asked for volunteer participants to be interviewed and outlined the ethical guidelines (Appendix C).

Among those who answered the message sent to the Italianialondra.com, I chose twenty volunteers according to sample selection criteria. Eleven were males and nine females; aged between twenty-five and thirty-six years old (thirteen out of twenty were aged over thirty and seven under thirty). Three of them were students and the rest were employed.

Research Method

In-depth interviews and follow-up email questions

I decided to use in-depth interviewing as the main method of data collection since I had adopted an interpretative approach (qualitative in nature; Creswell, 1994; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The central concern of interpretative research is to understand human experiences at a holistic level and I valued in-depth interviewing as a suitable tool for accomplishing the aims of a study focusing on "evolving" processes, such as identity and community, and on the development of a particular context. It was assumed that multiple, socially constructed realities exist and that the meanings individuals give to their experiences should be objects of study. By using in-depth interviewing, the aim was to obtain specific information, explanations, background and contextual material. I considered that talking face-to-face would enable disclosure of all the relevant data in as accurate and complete a

manner as possible, while also probing areas of concern arising during the discussion. The choice of this methodology was also based on the consideration that the aims of the research address complex issues that could not be unpacked otherwise, especially in online environments.

Despite the fact that today online communities, online social networks (boyd & Heer, 2006) and multiplayer online games (Boellstorff, 2006) have become popular sites for ethnographic enquiry; in this research online participant observation was rejected. In particular, there is evidence of the limitations of online participant observation. During online participant observation, tension and complication in determining what constitutes data could have arisen since online contexts are constructed interactively and the researcher has little access to typical sense-making devices used to identify and collect data. Furthermore, as Hine (2008) points out, taking on an active participant role in an overt ethnography means that the ethnographer has to negotiate access, and self-present in a way that members will find acceptable. Hine explains that this can be problematic; she mentions Rutter and Smith (2005) who found that their presence in the online setting was challenged by some participants. Rutter and Smith re-established trust through guarantees from some online group members who had met them offline, and felt able to vouch them. I was concerned that considerable effort may need to be invested in creating a credible online persona (Sanders, 2005). Assuming that Italians were just ”in transit” or passing through, the risk was that, once trust was established, they would leave the online community. The possibility of establishing trust was at stake.

The aim in this study was to find out whether different logics do exist in the constructing of relations, and why they develop. I aimed to understand how past experiences have affected the users' present lives and relationships and to reconstruct their life-narratives in order to define what kind of travellers they are. This reconstruction requires asking the participants very direct questions, and I thought that face-to-face in-depth interviews were the tool most suitable for obtaining information otherwise difficult to reveal in the presence of other participants (in the case of ethnography).

Interviews were organized on the basis of some guiding hypotheses. I planned to begin with open questions. The aim was to avoid interviewees understanding my ideas and hypotheses. The need to be “open” emerged because phenomena ignored by previous researchers could be recognized. Creswell (1994) suggests that a qualitative study should begin with a “grand tour” (Appendix A) question (a statement of the question being examined in the study in its most general form) or a guiding hypothesis followed by sub-questions (no more than five or seven). He suggests the following:

- Pose questions that use non-directional wording
- Use open-ended questions without reference to the literature or theory unless otherwise dictated by a qualitative design type
- Use a single focus and specify the research site in the research questions (in Creswell, 1994, p. 71–73)

Creswell's (1994) guidelines were applied. Openness and flexibility helped to interpret people through their own perceptions, extrapolating rather than imposing categories.

From the first round of interviews (conducted in October 2004), new issues emerged. I formulated some follow-up questions (Appendix B) including new issues

and feedback on debated arguments. I had already planned a second round of interviews at the time of the first round. To this aim, I had previously asked all the interviewees whether they would agree to be interviewed a second time. All said that they would be available, but seven later withdrew their consent and some preferred to be contacted by telephone since this was easier for them. There were several problems associated with a telephone interview, including the special arrangements needed to record the respondents' answers to open-ended questions. I decided to formulate a list of follow-up questions and forwarded them to the sample by email in March 2005. Email enabled rapid connections with the respondents in an environment of their own choosing (Mann & Stewart, 2000). It was considered that, as Bampton and Cowton (2002) argue, emailing the sample would also benefit from the advantages of the separation. My physical absence meant that the respondents would not be embarrassed about answering particular questions, in the way they may have been in a face-to-face interview. They could answer questions when they had time, and had the time to construct a response to a particular question. In this way, insights into specific categories of questioning related to previous observations were gained. On the other hand, I was aware that, as Bampton and Cowton emphasize, the possible reduction in spontaneity may be a disadvantage and that email provides a limited register for communication. Mann and Stewart argue that social cues, such as body language, tone, facial cues and environmental images, which add to impressions gained during a face-to-face interview, are absent and that portrayal of strong personal feelings in text answers may be less likely. Therefore, in case of misunderstandings or doubts, I sent more questions to the interviewees. Additional insights were gained. Finally, the usage of email is a fairly new addition to interview methodology and this study proved that it could be an effective tool. All data were gathered by April 2005.

The fieldwork

After receiving ethics approval from London Metropolitan University[1], I conducted in-depth interviews according to the interviewees' schedule and availability. I arranged appointments with the interviewees via email and telephone. I met people in public places, mainly during the weekends to avoid interviewing after a long working day. To avoid disturbances during the interviews, with the agreement of the respondent, I chose relatively quiet public places.

Once I had recognized the respondents, I introduced myself and my academic background. After introductory pleasantries, I repeated the general purposes of the research. Then, I analysed the role that the interview plays, indicated the approximate time required to complete the interview, and confirmed that the information given to me would be treated confidentially.

Prior to starting, I asked permission to tape the interview. I employed a tape recorder. All the respondents agreed. The recorder was switched on only after this introduction in order to give the respondents time to acclimatize and start building trust. Nobody appeared to feel inhibited.

Interviews were conducted in Italian.

Then, follow-up by email (Section: Research Method) was useful for gathering more information and broadening new issues.

[1] In this article I present part of the results from my PhD research (London Metropolitan University, Department of Applied Social Sciences, 2003-2007).

I conducted twenty-three interviews, but only twenty were valid. During face-to-face encounters it emerged that some volunteers misunderstood the requested criteria. For example, I realized that one of the participants was only registered with the Italianialondra.com virtual community. He never participated in an event, never took part in an online discussion, and never used the Forum to post an advertisement. He merely received and answered the announcement I sent to his private mail. I decided to exclude this person from the study. I excluded also a girl who had been living in London only for one month. I considered that her residency was too short to include her in the sample. Only thirteen of the participants answered the second round of interviews. The rest withdrew.

Purpose

Maintaining empathic neutrality

In conducting the interviews, the purpose was to try to take a view of the interviewees via introspection and reflection, in a way that was non-judgmental and not subjective in terms of my own biases, neither objective in terms of no bias, but seeking to preserve their perspective.

The aim was to maintain what Patton (1990, p. 55) calls an "empathic neutrality", a position that recognizes that research cannot be value free and which advocates that researchers should make their assumptions transparent, endeavouring not to influence circumstances. Patton points out that naturalistic inquiry is contrasted to experimental research where the investigator attempts to control completely the condition of the study. In its strong form, as Jensen (2002) argues, this means that the researcher immerses him/herself in a culture and grasps the "native's point of view", while in a more modest form, qualitative studies always involve a weighing of theoretical aims with practical constraints. However, as already mentioned, my research project was not only the outcome of my professional experience. It also came from the personal desire to deepen the understanding of the issues that face the latest generation of Italians in London, to which I belong. I was aware that I respond to some of the criteria (Section: Sampling Procedures) on the basis of which the sample was selected: I am Italian, thirty years old, and I was living in London to study for a PhD. Therefore, although I never took part in the social activities promoted by the virtual community, its participants were potentially my peers. They could have been colleagues of mine. This was an advantage in order to get what Patton indicates as "personal contact:" to share the experience, not to try to be an objective outsider, but to get to know people in order to understand them, and gain insight by reflecting on those experiences. Patton emphasizes the need to understand the other's views, and argues that if we adopt only an objective perspective on phenomena, we risk of understanding just *things* about them, not meanings. I tried to maintain an intermediate position. During face-to-face in-depth interviews, I told the respondents my experiences, but I did not show an in-depth knowledge of London, or my personal or political ideas about British and Italian society and opinions about online communication. During the encounters, I also ensured the participants' anonymity, confidentiality, avoidance of harm and reciprocity (Appendix C). The overall aim was to encourage the respondents to talk as much as possible and to make them feel listened to. So, in order to establish a familiar atmosphere, I listened carefully and expressed interest and attention to their words. However, I biased some respondents' answers. This emerged, as I am going to explain, during data analysis when I applied

critical interpretation to data, reviewed more literature and resorted to reflexivity as inter-subjective reflection.

Data Analysis

To capture, portray and explain the social world of the Italianialondra.com virtual community, I moved directly from raw data to more analytical accounts according to the conceptual scaffolding to which Ritchie and Lewis (2003) refer: the analytic hierarchy. This hierarchy consists of a series of "viewing" platforms, each of which involves a series of analytical tasks that enabled me to gain an overview and make sense of data. The first stage involves data management: sorting and synthesizing the data in order to move on to more interpretative work, making sense of the findings through the production of descriptive and then explanatory accounts. During this stage I found links and connections between many emerging issues. I critically read the data according to categories and, having found what appeared to be linkages and associations in the data, I investigated why those linkages existed. Looking for explanations, I realized that I was missing some central information. I realized that it was no longer possible to follow the guiding hypotheses, on which I formulated the interview questions, to interpret the answers and find patterns. Rather, I had to put the hypotheses on one side and reflect especially on how my presence was biasing the outcome of the research. Moreover, despite the fact that I was convinced that the literature I reviewed provided the skills to attempt the qualitative inquiry, I had to review more literature in order to acquire the "theoretical sensitivity" as defined in Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 42). They refer to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and the capability to separate that which is pertinent from that which is not. In particular, I reviewed studies that have analysed the role of diasporic media as means of a new "positioning" for deterritorialised people (Tsagarousianou, 1999) and studies on the earlier wave of Italian migration to London (Fortier, 2003).

Consequently, factors, which were not initially evident in the data, emerged and patterns could be delineated. I teased out explanations reflecting on contradictions and associations, as I explain in the Findings portion of this paper.

Findings

An unexpected result was that the profile of the selected members of Italianialondra.com was more similar to that of the migrant who moves to a new country for a very clear purpose, settles there and maintains a close tie to class structure (Braidotti, 1994). It emerged that the respondents belong to middle class backgrounds. They do not possess the characteristics of the nomad, such as being transitory. In fact, the sample was composed of Italians who had been living in London on average for seven years and had no intention of returning to their mother country, or move from London to anywhere else. So, the hypothesis that they were temporarily in London was wrong. I also erroneously hypothesized that only two different generations of Italians, one made up of short-term workers and the other formed by Italians who migrated after the war, were living in London. Since I knew that the participants had not migrated in the post-war period, I assumed that they were temporarily resident in London (as I was).

It emerged that the new migration trend in London is not forced migration, but neither is it entirely voluntary since migrants were compelled by economic

circumstances, including structures of inequality in their home territories, to make journeys and undertake arduous work that they would not have undertaken had they had the possibility of earning the same salaries in Italy as they did in Britain. But they did not have this possibility. Therefore, it can be said that the new migration is an expansion from a homeland in search of work, even if, in contrast with earlier migrants, the new migrants did have alternative means of earning a basic living.

So, I did ascertain the existence of a permanent form of migracy and, taking account of the Italians' "homing desire" as distinct from a desire for homeland (Brah, 1996), I investigated whether this was supported by the social activities that Italianialondra.com promotes.

In the first phase of data analysis, it emerged that the term "home" was linked to "Italy", "London" and "Italianialondra.com". As a consequence, in order to deepen the significance of "home", I formulated a follow-up question directly asking to the respondents what "home" meant for them. From the answers to the follow-up questions it was clear that most of the respondents definitely considered their "home" to be London, the place where they would return to after a journey and where their own families were. Then, I re-coded data comparing follow-up questions to the first interviews. I reflected on why the interviewees were identifying "home" with London but at the same time were arguing that participating to Italianialondra.com was a way to "return home". Revisiting the first coding, I realized that often the reason that induced the interviewees to become members of Italianialondra.com was that they were feeling "alone" in London. I questioned why these people, who feel at home in London, at the same time were suffering from loneliness and needed to participate in the virtual community to overcome this situation. As a matter of fact, I hypothesized that the participants, despite considering London their home, were not fully integrated into London on a social level, but they were reluctant to admit this in front of me. I resolved the contradiction that emerged during this second coding through reflexivity.

In particular, some of the men were shy about saying that they were regularly participating in the virtual community. However, from in-depth analysis, it emerged that they actively participated in online communication. Possibly, these interviewees were shy about showing enthusiasm for the virtual community because this could have been interpreted as a sort of dependence. They feared that I would judge them negatively. Also, gender biased answers. The hypothesis is that the men were trying not to appear as geeks[2] to impress me. As said, during the interviews the respondents showed themselves to be socially integrated into the British society, whereas from the interpretation of data, it emerged that most of them were not. The interviewees were reluctant to admit in front of me that after many years they were still attempting to integrate.

I resorted to reflexivity as intersubjective reflection, as Finlay (2002b) suggests, and I explored the mutual meanings emerging within the research relationship. By focusing on the situated and negotiated nature of the research encounter, I realised that in some cases, my presence helped to project particular identifications, sometimes reminding the respondents "who they would never be like", in a comparison through which they build their profiles. For example, during the interviews the respondents pretended to be able to adapt to any place and argued that they considered themselves flexible and cosmopolitan and to have more experience than their peers who live in Italy, but I found that, via the Italianialondra.com

[2] 'Geek' is slang, meaning an expert in computers, but is often considered offensive when used by outsiders.

community, Italians were trying to reconstruct a localised community (as opposed to cosmopolitan attitude). It is in the local dimension of London that Italians are "putting down roots" once for all (as opposed to nomadic attitude). In contrast to the literature (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2008) that demonstrate that SNSs are mainly used to maintain links with pre-existing networks, the respondents did not use Italianialondra.com as a cheaper and faster way to communicate with family, friends and others living in the country of origin. It emerged that respondents subscribed to the Italianialondra.com online community because of a desperate need for identification with similar, sympathetic fellow migrants: workers proud of the experience and professionalism gained during the years spent in London. As in Chen and Wellman (2009), they used Italianialondra.com to built new co-ethnic friendships that were nurtured outside the bounds of CMC. Moreover, they said that they travelled away from their families to be finally independent and free from social networks characterized by a particularly strong solidarity. Gina (30 years old) said:

> (We are not like those) curious people who come to London to have an experience. They work in coffee shops, they come and go, they are still linked to their families and they are not always able to earn their living.

Yet, I found that the fact that Italians were using the Web to do things similar to those they had rejected. For instance the virtual community is referred to as "mamma". The participants said that Italianialondra.com supported a network for mutual support that took the place of a family, a sort of "virtual mamma". So I believe that they were strategically reiterating the rejection of motherism in order to justify their choice to leave Italy and, also, to proudly prove their identity in front of me. Their aim was to manifest their refusal of returning to the homeland (which I represented) and to convey an image of themselves "different" from ordinary Italians who live temporary in London (like I was). Marinella (33 years old) said:

> M.: (I feel different from those Italians who) arrived here because they have family problems or they are spoilt boys and girls who at the early age of 30-32 [ironic] have realised that maybe they need to do something despite depending on their families. Thus they asked themselves "what will I do to have a family?" and pressed the panic button! Answer: "I will go to the university!" And they arrive here with great aspirations but they have to learn to content themselves. They do not know what working hard means.
>
> I: Are the participants of Italianialondra.com of this kind?
>
> M.: No … I go about with professionals … it is nice because you can know a variety of different types, but professionals are those who followed the same itinerary I did, they have been travelling when they were young, they went the university when they were around twenty and meanwhile they started working; thus, at the age of thirty they arrived in London with *the skills, the ability and competences requested by the market* … here in London there are many successful Italians. They work very hard. This country teaches you that if you want to succeed you have to work hard.

After many years spent in London, the regular members of Italianialondra.com appeared to have adjusted their way of dressing, talking, consuming and other kinds

of behaviour according to British patterns. They "transformed" their cultural identity. Italians were using the concept of the cultural as the concept of difference to define a new identity made up of elements that they assimilated from British culture and of elements of Italian culture, but without those aspects they were critical of. The new hybrid identity that resulted emerges as expression of a process in continual evolution, in which social actors play an active role in interpreting and continually reinterpreting the information flows in which they are immersed, and which they help transform. As Geertz (1999) claims, everything relies on the context in which evaluations and comparisons are made, and that everything changes depending on what the construction of identity is founded, and on what is involved to include, negate or simply animate identities (Geertz, p. 66).

My presence contributed to the new migrants' identity construction. This was confirmed by the fact that some participants argued that if the interviews had been conducted in English and by an interviewer whose mother tongue was English; they would probably have behaved differently. They meant that with an English-speaking interviewer they would have lowered their tone of voice and avoided gesticulating in the way Italians do when they speak generally. I argue that the content of the interviews would also probably have been different in the presence of a British person. The respondents would probably have emphasized positive aspects of Italian culture in more depth. The participants took it for granted that I was aware of positive social and cultural aspects of Italy, but highlighted in particular negative connotations of their homeland in order to justify their decision to move. Probably, if interviewed by someone with an English background, the respondents would have emphasized on different things. However, hypotheses about this issue could not be supported by evidence and thus I could do nothing but admit that I was aware that I was not a privileged voice.

Finally, the Italians under study were found to be more similar to to post-war Italian migrants who, as Fortier (2003) examines, elevated migration as a source of empowerment and of collective belonging against the threat of estrangement. In the case analysed by Fortier, post-war migrants in London reprocessed biblical narratives in order to represent themselves as new community sharing the very experience of leaving home and "becoming stranger" (please see Seganti, 2008a). As well, by interacting via Italianialondra.com, the Italians I interviewed participated in the construction of a new migrant identity built on sharing the experience of migration and the ongoing experience in London. New media emerged as means of transforming an "empty place" of settlement into a "lived space" (Tsagarousianou, 1999, p. 27) in which the new hybrid identity could be performed: a way to "return home".

It still remains to know whether and how the new Italian migrants use other social media to be "in-between space" (Diminescu, 2008) and to produce "new spaces where remote localities and their experiences come together and become 'synchronised'" (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p. 62).

Discussion

Snape and Spencer (2003) suggest that researchers should reflect upon ways in which bias might creep into their qualitative research practice and acknowledge that their own backgrounds and believes might have an impact on the research. They suggest that the researcher has to provide as much information as possible in terms of both technical details of conduct and potential bias so that others can scrutinise the objectivity of the investigation.

However, in my opinion, complete objectivity is impossible. On the one hand, I think that in modern everyday life, it is difficult to definitively classify experience as "real" or "not real". It is more helpful to determine the degree of reality in an event. On the other, I believe that, as Stearns (1998) argues, one can never guarantee the honesty and openness of subjects, and that research is always coloured by our subjectivities. It is for this reason that I chose an interpretative approach (Section: Why Use Qualitative Methodology), which does not aim at obtaining an objective view. In contrast, my approach aimed at unpacking individual perspectives and at developing explanation rather than descriptions. So, my opinion is that researchers should be aware that "paradoxically, attempts to critically evaluate and deconstruct become, themselves, rhetorical strategies to claim authority and credibility (Finaly, 2002b, p. 226).

Being aware that "objective truth about a society or a culture cannot be established, because there are inevitably going to be conflicting versions of what happened" (Agrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000, p. 675), I attempted to interpret acts and meanings, interrogating myself on the potential ways in which I could bias the outcome of the study. As Patton emphasizes, the importance of the researcher as a person has to be considered: s/he is an instrument, but not a mechanical device or a test instrument as in quantitative research; what is therefore important is that s/he reflects on her/his role. As a qualitative novice researcher, I attempted to do so by following some expert's advice, especially Finlay's (2002b). She distinguishes five variants of reflexivity, as follows:

- *Introspection*: researchers think about their own experiences in relation to research question. As mentioned, "introspection" was employed to offer a clear account of the research. The reflection on how my identity and values were affecting the research design gave me the opportunity to arrive to an unexpected outcome. During the interviews it emerged that participants belonged to middle class backgrounds and that they were permanently living in London. While the hypothesis was that I would analyse the role of virtual communication in promoting a network of travellers temporarily abroad, the sample was composed mainly of Italians who settled in London. So, the metaphor of nomadism (Section: A Study about the Role of an Online Community in the Lives of Italians Living in London) could not be applied to the Italians under study, for whom the virtual community is definitely a tool for re-territorialization. In Finlays's words, it worked as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight; that is in this case that the sample was misidentified.
- *Reflexivity as intersubjective reflection*: researchers think about their interaction with research participants. I clarified that my purpose before starting the fieldwork, was that of maintaining "empathic neutrality". I also underlined the importance of conducting the interviews having acquired "theoretical sensitivity". Yet I admitted that my preparation was insufficient to unpack the dialogic interaction between the subjects under study and me. Only at the stage of data analysis, reflection about relations in the field made me realise that for the participants I was representing the person temporarily in London, the "non-integrated" person symbolizing a condition from which they distanced themselves. On this order of difference the new Italian identity conveyed by the Italianialondra.com virtual community was built and my presence contributed to such construction. However, by using "reflexivity as

discursive deconstruction" and by applying critical interpretation to data, it emerged that that despite their attempt, the interviewees were not as integrated as they wished. This gave me the opportunity to situate the interviewees and to construct detailed profiles of them, as explained somewhere else (Seganti, 2008b).

- *Reflexivity as discursive deconstruction*: attention is paid to the ambiguity of meanings in language used and how this has an impact on modes of presentation. This was key to interpret and understand in terms of data analysis. Reflecting on the ambiguity of meanings (as for example in the case of "home"; Section: Findings) helped to identify those cultural differences on which the new migrants' identity is founded on. For instance it was key to understand that a defining element of community membership within Italianialondra.com was sharing the attempt to integrate into the British social fabric, and all the consequences of this (loneliness, adaptation and assimilation). It also helped to unpack contradictions (they maintained that they would never return to Italy, but through the virtual community they are recreating online little Italys; Seganti, 2008b), and to recognise cultural resistances that translation can hide (they were independent of their families of origin - the "mamma"-, but argued that they consider Italianialondra.com as a substitute of the mother figure).
- *Reflexivity as mutual collaboration*: involves asking the participant to reflect on the experiences of the research process. I have not encouraged the participants to reflect on the experiences of the research process because the data gathered through in-depth interviews were already sufficient to answer all the research questions. This approach, as Finlay (2002b) explains, recognizes that research participants have the capacity to be reflexive beings and that, for example, their interpretations can help the researcher in confronting, modifying and honing his interpretations. It offers the opportunity to hear, and take into account, multiple and conflicting voices; thus challenging egalitarian rhetoric.
- *Reflexivity as social critique*: researchers look at power relations and effects of social classes. This variant of reflexivity arises out of the social constructionist and feminist literature. In analysing the social construction of power, it facilitates the recognition of multiple, shifting researcher–participant positions. Despite the fact that my aim in this study was not to achieve a sophisticated analysis of power relations within Italianialondra.com, reflection on how gender was affecting the development of the interview provided a stepping-stone for me to figure out how to position the participants. The idea, explained in Section: Findings, that male participants were shy about saying that they were regularly participating in the virtual community to impress me, induced me to question gender issues. So, inspired by the results that reflexivity produced, I re-analysed data with the aim of examining and discussing variations in attitudes/behaviours and online communication patterns based on gender. I found that I was missing again vital information and email follow-up question allowed me to obtain information that I would have hardly obtained face-to-face. By email, I posed direct question to male interviewees (for instance "do you exclude women from chat conversation?") and obtained new information (e.g., males respondents admitted that they often excluded women from chat conversation, that they were suffering from

loneliness while in London and that they were regularly participating in the activities promoted by the online community).

So far, even if I am aware that, as Maslow (1966) asserted, "there is no substitute for experience, none at all" (1966, p. 45), my attempt was to report on my experience so that other Italian researchers working on new Italian migration trends could obtain a helpful source of information on the topic. At the same time, my aim was to provide qualitative novice researchers, as I was, with research techniques valuable and essential in unpacking the relation between subject and researcher. Finally I hope that reflecting on my presence by exploring the practice of reflexivity would increase the integrity and trustworthiness of my study and therefore encourage the readers of this journal to be interested in my research.

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Appendix A

Gran tour questions

(1) Past circumstances. Tell me about your life in Italy. Why did you leave Italy?
(2) Relationships – Friendships. Investigate the experience of living in a new environment. Tell me about the impact with the new environment. Can you please describe new important friendships and relationships as growing up? How has your life changed since you arrived in London?
(3) Nomadic identity Adaptation, what does this word evoke to you? How would you define your situation in London (temporary, transition, permanent)?
(4) CMC. When do you think Italianialondra.com is for? How do you relate to the rest of the users? Ask what are the perceived difference between the encounter online and the encounter face-to-face
(5) Community Issues. What the Italianialondra.com community is, what does it mean for you? Imagine your journey in London without taking part to Italianialondra.com
(6) "Cultural"/ "national"/ "Italian" identity. When was the last time you felt "Italian"?

Appendix B

Follow-up questions topic guide

1) Are you still living in London?
    i) If not, why, what happened?
2) Do you still join Italianialondra.com?
    i) If so:
    ii) Why do you log in the Website?
    iii) How do you participate in online discussions?
    iv) Which of the community activities you enjoy most?
    v) Can you please describe the relationships you have established through Italianialondra.com?
    vi) Can you tell me your impressions about the adjustments that have been made in the Website management? Do you think these had an impact on the way participants interact?
        (a) If not:
    vii) What are the reasons for not participating in Italianialondra.com any longer? What happened? What has changed and why?
3) What characteristics do you share with the current/new users?

   i) What are the characteristics that distinguish you from the other users?
4) What does "home" mean for you?
   i) Where is "home" in your experience?
   ii) What was, if any, the role of new media in constructing your idea of "home"?
5) Do you use 3G videophones and/or similar communication technologies?
6) What do you think of the relation between children and virtual communities like Italianialondra.com?
7) Would you use technologies similar to Italianialondra.com in another country?
   i) In the future?

Appendix C

In my study, I strictly observed the guidelines issued by the Faculty Ethics Research Committee (Heger, 2002) and the Data Protection Act. Accordingly, the research design was such that it posed no risk to the research subjects or to the researcher. The guidelines were observed when recruiting the sample, during the interviews and in the writing up of the thesis. Before any interview, all the respondents read a letter in which I assured them that:

- I would do the interviews only with the full consent of the respondent.
- I would inform each individual about the purpose of the investigation and its outcomes.
- I would use data in a confidential manner.
- They could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.
- The data gathered were codified in order to guarantee individuals' confidentiality and anonymity.
- In the writing-up I would change not only real names, but also aliases and pseudonyms (where used) in order to further respect the social dynamics of cyberspace (Ess & the AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002).
- I would safely store all the data gathered that were encoded in order to guarantee individuals' confidentiality.

The respondents read the letter acknowledging their full consent.

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